


# Northrop Frye: Eastern and Western Perspectives (review)

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edition of *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (1965): 'The Qumran biblical documents cover the whole Hebrew Bible, with the exception of the book of Esther, and are about a thousand years older than the most ancient codices previously extant. With this newly discovered material at their disposal, experts ... can trace the process by which the text of the Bible attained its final shape. Moreover they are in a position to prove that it has remained virtually unchanged for the last two thousand years.'

Still on the subject of biblical translation, Frye moves from the pre-Christian Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible to Jerome's Latin Vulgate: 'Christianity as a religion has been dependent from the beginning on translation. After the New Testament period, the centre of power in the Western world shifted to Rome, and with that shift came the need for a Latin translation of the Bible. The Latin translation that appeared was known as the Vulgate, that is, the one in common use. The translation was made by St. Jerome, in what may well be the greatest effort of scholarship ever achieved by a single man. For the next thousand years, the Vulgate Latin Bible *was* the Bible as far as Europe was concerned.' Jerome died in 240 CE. The 'New Testament period' Frye alludes to takes us to the end of the first century, more or less. Between the second and sixth centuries, one or more anonymous Latin translations of the Bible circulated in North Africa and Europe. Known as the *Vetus Latina* or Old Latin, pre-Jerome versions of the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha were translated into Latin from the Septuagint and are preserved in manuscripts from the fifth and sixth centuries. Around 382 CE, 'Damascus, Bishop of Rome, gave to Jerome ... the task of revising the [Old] Latin Bible' (B.J. Roberts, *The Old Testament Text and Versions*, 1951). It wasn't until 410 CE or thereabouts that Jerome finished his version of the Old Testament, most of which he translated directly from Hebrew, working in Bethlehem and elsewhere with the help of Rabbinic scholars. (LINDA MUNK)

Jean O'Grady and Wang Ning, editors. *Northrop Frye: Eastern and Western Perspectives*
University of Toronto Press. xxi, 183. $50.00

I still remember the excitement on first reading Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* as a graduate student at Peking University in China in 1979, after the disastrous Cultural Revolution. A friend sent me the book from Rochester, New York, when even Peking University Library didn't have a copy, which only added to my *plaisir du texte*. In the winter 1980 issue of *Waiguo wenxue yanjiu* [*Studies in Foreign Literature*], I published 'Frye's Critical Theory,' which was the very first essay on Frye published in mainland China. Given my longtime interest since then, I feel especially

happy to find a collection of essays published by the University of Toronto Press on Frye from Chinese and Western perspectives.

The collection offers a rare opportunity to have a glimpse into some interesting but little-discussed aspects of Frye's writings related to the East. Though Frye is unquestionably a 'product of Western culture,' Robert Denham shows that he did 'wade more deeply into Eastern waters than his public writings suggest.' It is surprising to find Frye struggling with esoteric but important Buddhist concepts, trying to align them with Western ones in 'an experiment of the translation of ideas'; and it is revealing of the magnanimity of his mind that he believed in cross-cultural translatability and rejected 'false antitheses about Eastern & Western thought.' G.N. Forst discusses the connection of Frye and Kant, and from the East-West perspective, one can see even more in that connection and understand why Frye's ideas should prove so relevant and attractive to intellectuals in post-Mao China. Against the orthodoxy of socialist realism and the utilitarian idea that arts and literature must serve the socialist state, it is not difficult to see the enormous appeal of Frye's notion of the liberating power of 'free play' and his Kantian emphasis on the 'disinterestedness' of the aesthetic. The same can be said about Jean O'Grady's discussion of Frye's humanistic vision of the university and liberal education. The concept of a 'socially disengaged university' is as relevant today in China as it is in the West.

Frye's international reputation rests on his encyclopedic conceptualization of myth and archetypal criticism, which leads from literature to philosophy and religion and from an aesthetic to a social and spiritual vision transcending the reality we know. Several essays in this collection, particularly G.R. Gill on Frye's last major work, *Words with Power*, and Jan Gorak on his first important essay, 'The Argument of Comedy,' elucidate this point with clarity and persuasiveness. The section on Frye and Canada firmly establishes Frye as a major figure in the formulation of the Canadian literary tradition, and shows how his critical theory relates to major works of Canadian literature. Most readers, however, may feel especially interested in the section on Frye and China, as it provides a rare opportunity to learn about the reception and influence of Frye's works in a very different country. Unfortunately, I find that section rather weak. Ye Shuxian's survey of the reception of myth and archetypal criticism in China does provide useful information. He mentions my 1983 essay, but ignores my earlier (1980) and much fuller account of Frye's critical theory, and thereby cuts short the history of Chinese reception by several years. Wu Chizhe considers Frye's 'applicability' to 'Chinese realities,' but he fails to understand Frye or Chinese literature adequately. Statements like the following are simply wrong: 'In China, tragedy as a dramatic form ... emerged with the rise of the bourgeoisie in about the thirteenth and fourteenth

centuries'; Shakespeare wrote 'tragedies of character,' in which 'a mere flaw ... eventually leads to his own destruction,' a point Frye has specifically refuted in *Anatomy of Criticism*. Finally, Gu Mingdong's effort to find correspondence between Frye's modes of mimesis with the stages of a child's evolving ego only reduces Frye's rich and highly imaginative theoretical argument to a flat psychoanalytic progression with neither profound insight nor poetic brilliance. But this is just a beginning. Let's hope for a better volume when Frye's ideas become effectively integrated into contemporary Chinese criticism. (ZHANG LONGXI)

Ralph Maud. *Where Have the Old Words Got Me? Explications of Dylan Thomas's Collected Poems*
McGill-Queen's University Press. xix, 296. $60.00, $27.95

Ralph Maud's recent collection of explications for each of the ninety-three poems in Dylan Thomas's *Collected Poems 1934–1953* completes a project begun four decades earlier with his *Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry* (1963). The first volume, as Maud explains, was a 'trial by metaphor,' an early attempt to clarify the poems only a decade after the poet's death when little was known about the connections between the work and the life of the precocious poet who burst pyrotechnically upon the London literary scene at the age of nineteen. Now, in *Where Have the Old Words Got Me?*, Maud explains that 'it has always been biography that has led me to the doorway of a poem.' With the 1985 publication of Paul Ferris's *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, the door had swung open to allow for Maud's biographical explications. It is curious, therefore, though perhaps understandable, that they are here offered alphabetically rather than in the sequence of Maud and Walford Davies's 1988 edition of the *Collected Poems*. Maud defends his alphabetical presentation in the present study with the explanation that Thomas himself had blurred the whole notion of chronology by going back to his notebooks and revising poems published earlier. Yeats and Auden, of course, did the same thing, yet their collected poems are still profitably, if imperfectly, explored by reference to their original sequence of composition. That quibble aside, it must be acknowledged that Maud often provides a useful historical context for the discussion of particular poems, as when he notes that Thomas wrote no poetry that we know of from July 1941 until April 1944, only reviving his imaginative output with the prospect of peace after D-Day (6 June 1944) by writing 'his great poem of peace,' 'Fern Hill.'

The strength and perhaps the shortcomings of Maud's decision to deal separately with each poem can best be appreciated by pointing to one example. The early and audacious (some would say sacrilegious) 'Before I knocked' had been given only occasional notice in *Entrances* but here